

# InClass

A spotlight on faculty and their work

## Lost in Translation

John Sloop uses a hit television show to help students navigate the maze of mass media, culture and consciousness. BY ANGELA FOX

IT'S A TYPICAL MUGGY Nashville afternoon in late August, and the fall semester is just getting under way. Rain threatens as students scurry back from lunch across 21st Avenue to the Vanderbilt campus, intent on getting to their next class on time. At 1:10 p.m. sharp in a small room on the second floor of Calhoun Hall, Vanderbilt professor John Sloop launches into discussion of his favorite topic—television.

Not surprising, since Sloop, head of the Department of Communication Studies since 2005, holds a B.S. in media/advertising from Appalachian State University, a master's in speech communication from the University of Georgia, and a Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Iowa. He is an acknowledged expert on the rhetoric of the mass media, with 15 years' teaching experience, dozens of published articles, and several books to his credit.

What is a bit surprising is that the 16 freshmen in Sloop's seminar are there to hone their writing skills to college level through a study of the hit television series *Lost*.

Ah, a softball class with a pop-culture hook, you say. Well, hold on to that remote for just a second.

The class isn't more than a few minutes old when Sloop has introduced in rapid succession authors like Marshall McLuhan ("the medium is the message") and concepts like

Paul Du Gay's "circuit of culture." He also references *The Electronic Hearth* by Vanderbilt professor Cecelia Tichi and Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, both seminal books about television and its effect on culture. Not exactly the sources quoted in *TV Guide* or *Entertainment Weekly*. Then, just as the "uh-oh, what kind of course have I signed

up for" look begins to flicker in the students' eyes, Sloop almost winks at them with the question, "What character would you have killed off on *Lost* by now?" A light discussion ensues before Sloop steers the class back into deeper waters.



Ultimately, it becomes clear the issues Sloop will ask these freshmen to confront during the coming months may be as confounding as those facing the castaways on *Lost* itself. Like that fictional group of strangers thrown together on an apparently deserted

island in a remote corner of the Pacific and faced with the common goal of survival, Sloop's class also will form a community and develop the skills and self-discipline necessary to survive—and thrive—in Vanderbilt's challenging academic environment.

"Lessons from *Lost: A Case Study Introduction to Cultural Studies*" is one of more than 80 first-year writing seminars designed to launch entering students into a new academic and social order.

"This course works on a number of levels to do that," Sloop explains. "First, students learn to write at college level. Second, the course eases the transition into college because of the small class size and the fact that students get to choose a topic they are passionate about—and that also gives them a built-in community a couple times a week."

Indeed, only one student in Sloop's class has never watched *Lost* and most, like Sloop himself, are avid fans who eagerly discuss characters and plot details from the past two seasons and speculate about what the third season will bring.

Still, as Sloop stresses in his overview of the course, this is not a class about a popular television show but rather one that will "utilize *Lost* in order to think about and criticize relationships between and among mass media, culture, economics, production and consciousness or ideology." To do this

*continued on page 84*



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**In Class** *continued from page 28*  
students will use *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, by Jeremy Butler, and *Television: The Critical View*, by Horace Newcomb, both of which deal in high-level theory, as their primary textbooks. At the same time, Sloop and his students will bounce those weighty theories off episodes from the first and second seasons of *Lost* and flex their critical thinking muscles with the myriad interconnected "products" like Web pages and books the series has spawned.

Sloop came up with the idea for the course last year while teaching Rhetoric of the Mass Media, a course that explores how everything from politics and economics to style and sports is distributed within contemporary culture via mass media. It's a course described by Sloop as "providing critical skills and ways of reading mass-mediated discourses that encourage reflection on the 'unnoticed' influence of mass media on the contours of everyday life." When a student used *Lost* specifically as his jumping-off point to do that, Sloop took notice.

"The student did a reading of gender roles in *Lost*, and the class really got into it," Sloop recalls. "*Lost* is one of those shows that people feel fanatical—and political—about, and I thought it would be the perfect show to use as a case study."

Sloop himself has been a fan of the show from the beginning.

"I was a *Survivor* fan and had been reading about *Lost* before its debut," he says. "I was intrigued because *Lost* sounded like a show where the viewers would already know the genre and automatically have an in-group community."

Sloop's instincts proved right as *Lost* became an instant hit with an especially devoted following that not only watches the show each week but dissects its plot and character developments and symbolic nuances via the Internet each day. Internet postings, in fact, are an integral part of the way Sloop's freshman writing class will interact with each other and stake their claims on their own academic "island" during the coming months.

*Lost* also works as a vehicle for an exploration of cultural studies because it operates on so many levels—something most television shows do not.

"Besides exciting the passion of its view-

ers, *Lost* works with a transnational group of characters who reflect all sorts of questions of age, race, gender and even size politics," says Sloop. "Other shows aren't so explicitly tied to these questions."

The question of gender and the media is one that has long interested Sloop. His book *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* was published by The University of Massachusetts Press in 2004. He is currently working on a project that investigates the relationship between gender, sexuality, citizenship and transportation technologies (such as DVD players in cars) as media. The first essay emerging from this work will be published in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, a respected professional journal for which Sloop has been named editor-elect for volumes to be published between 2007 and 2009.

Sloop also is co-author with Kent A. Ono of *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration and California's Proposition 187*, published by Temple University Press in 2002.

"John's approach to rhetorical studies is unique," says Ono, director and professor of Asian American studies and professor of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. "While deeply grounded within classical rhetorical studies, his approach acknowledges, indeed nuances, post-structural and cultural studies approaches to the discipline."

Yet, notes Ono, Sloop's work reaches a broader audience than most rhetorical studies scholarship.

"The topics he chooses—prisons, transgendered identity—are ones that bridge academic and theoretical knowledge with everyday life. That he is so successful at bridging more traditional rhetorical studies with upstart cultural studies is a testament to his overall social skills and ability to work with others."

Ono, whose own focus is rhetoric, cultural and media/film studies, also has written several articles with Sloop and has known him since graduate school. "We both made it through the rhetorical studies program at the University of Iowa and shared many a walk across the Iowa City campus to get coffee," Ono recalls. "John debated with me on a wide variety of topics ranging from popular music and college basketball to red-dirt tobacco farming."

Sloop's colleagues at Vanderbilt are also among his fans. During the busy presidential primary season in the spring of 2004, Sloop team-taught a course with English professor and author Cecelia Tichi and Bruce Barry, professor of management at the Vanderbilt Owen School and a professor in the sociology department, where he teaches a course on technology, media and culture.

"He is an astute critic of media and popular culture," says Barry, "one who brings rigorous intellectual force to bear, but also seems able to make it accessible to students and others who are not academic specialists in the fields of rhetoric and culture studies."

According to Barry, Sloop's approach in the classroom is energetic and passionate. "Students—many of whom, like the rest of us who know him well, just call him 'Sloop'—love him because he is deeply engaged in trying to get them to share his enthusiasm for the subject matter. He seems always willing to go that extra mile to connect with students and offer feedback on their work. I would add that he is well known and respected among many faculty at Vanderbilt in various fields because he is a sharp intellect who ranges widely as a thinker and critic."

Sloop's far-ranging interests, aside from television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonus Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate so many topics—and refract them through the lens of mass media and cultural studies—is the key to his appeal as a teacher.

"With a class like Sloop's Rhetoric of the Mass Media, the most valuable lesson for me was learning to look at television, media and

pop culture as a larger reflection of our social values and philosophy," says Matt O'Brien, who graduated from Vanderbilt in 2001 with a degree in communications studies and computer science. O'Brien worked as a producer at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* for four years before becoming a head writer on the newest entry into late-night talk television, *TalkShow with Spike Feresten*.

"He taught me to develop a much larger perspective and frame while observing media

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or pop culture. That perspective is one of the most crucial skills used in writing something like topical comedy. The larger your perspective, the more funny common threads you can unearth as a result."

While most of Sloop's students won't go on to write for television, the professor sees communications studies as vital to any career. "Communication is the essence of humanity," Sloop says. "If our reality is in large part ideas that humans have created, we should ask ourselves how we get these ideas. It isn't through other

people but through mediated text—so we must deal with the media issue. I'm not worried about students remembering the text but in remembering the ways in which we as a culture look at that text. Frankly, I also worry about the health of democracy in a world with so many mediated sources that the striations of beliefs are becoming so great."

Thanks to John Sloop, Vanderbilt students are challenged to think about those sources and beliefs in ways they never before have. Or, as

O'Brien puts it, "You can watch *Lost* the couch-potato way, or you can watch it the Sloop way. The Sloop way adds a very tangible philosophical aspect to experiencing media that most people don't have the luxury of seeing." ▼

*Angela Fox, a freelance writer specializing in the arts and travel, lives most of the year in Nashville, where she also is an actress. Her "Travels with Angela" segment is heard weekly on the nationally syndicated Lifetime Radio for Women.*

**S.P.O.V.** *continued from page 67*

most important thing on my mind, she was adamant about the fact that I would need food while waiting until an evacuation plan was made.

Unfortunately, my friends and I had devoured the *baklava* by the next day, when I was to be evacuated with a friend the embassy allowed at the last minute. Packed on a ship bound for Cyprus, we simultaneously felt relief and disappointment. We were glad to be on the safety of the cruise ship, but we were saddened that our plans had been ruined and incensed

about the fate of the city we had grown to love. Traveling from Cyprus to Istanbul to London, we constantly judged each location vis-à-vis Beirut. For some reason we could not clearly define, no city could compare to Beirut's glamorous energy and excitement.

Looking back I'm still mystified why I was never scared of the events unfolding around me in Lebanon. Mostly, I felt excited to be in a war zone for the first time, angry at the Israelis and those who sanctioned their actions, and a curious attachment to the city and those with whom I experienced its cul-

ture, nightlife and its people. Only now can I begin to understand the feelings of my father, my relatives and the Lebanese, who have all gone through similar experiences, only on an immensely greater scale.

Upon arriving home I heard a song by the legendary Lebanese singer Fairuz that somehow perfectly encapsulated my feelings: "To Beirut—Peace to Beirut with all my heart . . . / From the soul of her people she makes wine, / From their seat, she makes bread and jasmine. / So how did it come to taste of smoke and fire?" ▼